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THE
Overcrowding of the Profession.

EXTRACTS FROM AN ADDRESS DELIVERED MARCH 23, 1885,
BEFORE THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF THE
CHICAGO MEDICAL COLLEGE.

Presented by the author

BY THE PRESIDENT

DR. E. J. DOERING.



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GENTLEMEN:—Before announcing the topic of my address to-night, I will state that I recognize the fact that at our annual meetings, occurring as they do, on the Commencement Day of our College, it is customary to make the professional outlook as cheerful and bright as possible; to picture in glowing colors the noble and heroic life of the physician, and to dwell with emphasis on the fact that there is always “room at the top.” Therefore, in deviating to-night from the usual course pursued, and instead, presenting a few sober facts to your consideration, I trust you will find a sufficient explanation in the urgent necessity, the duty we owe to each other, to thoroughly discuss the dangers of the hour, embraced in my theme to-night: *The overcrowding of the profession, its causes, effects, and the remedies to be applied.*

The curse of the profession to-day is a multiplicity of medical colleges, most of which are of an inferior type, veritable *Diploma-Mills*. In the United States, with a population of 50,000,000, we have twice as many medical schools as exist in all the following

countries combined, viz: The German Empire, the Austrian Empire, the Russian Empire, Great Britain, France, Sweden and Norway, representing a population of 300,000,000. In Chicago *alone* we have more medical schools than may be found in the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire, and we graduate in this city this year more physicians than are annually licensed to practice in the whole German Empire with a population of 45,000,000. Think of it, gentlemen! It ought to make our cheeks tingle with shame, for the existence of such facts constitutes a national dishonor, reflects discredit upon every American physician, and justly makes us the laughing stock of the whole civilized world.

Consider for a moment the origin of the average medical school in this State. Any five physicians actuated by an intense desire to increase a limited practice, can club together, forward \$4.50 to the Secretary of State, receive by return mail the necessary charter, and another medical college is organized. What is true of this State is true of every other State in the Union, and thus it happens that we see medical colleges springing up everywhere, in cities, villages, and out of the way places, without any reference to the needs of the profession or for the sake of the communities, but simply for the purpose of giving the "organizers" an unfair advantage over their competitors in the practice of medicine. The average medical college, then, is nothing but an advertisement scheme to enrich the few at the expense of many. It enables the physician, utterly unknown outside the circle of a limited practice and his immediate relatives, to suddenly blossom forth as a Professor of the Principles and Practice of Medicine or of Surgery; it enables him to adorn his letter-heads with the seductive title, and gives him an opportunity to explain to the unsophisticated patient any absence from home by the statement that he was lecturing at the college. It enables him to advertise in various and many ways, and at the same time not conflict with the code of ethics. No wonder, then, that in Chicago alone we have over 150 professors and lecturers on medicine, or about one professor to every six physicians, although even this low ratio is constantly diminishing, so that in time the physician who is nothing but a plain M. D. will be indeed a rarity—a startling curiosity.

Consider, again, the course of instruction in vogue in nearly

all of our medical colleges. Two courses of lectures, of from four to five months' duration, in each course the same lectures repeated, transform the medical student, whether fresh from college, from a store, or from the farm, into an M. D., with all the rights and privileges pertaining to that degree. Well may the learned and eloquent Professor Pepper, of Philadelphia, in a most admirable essay on Higher Medical Education, exclaim, "Can it be that the apprentice must practice five years before he is regarded as a skilled workman, fitted to mend or make rude machines of iron or brass, and that in this land of intelligence and common sense one who has studied medicine less than one-third that time may have his license to meddle with and make or mar that most wonderful machine—man's body—infinately complex, gifted with boundless capacities, and freighted with the awful responsibility of an immortal soul? Can it be that seven long years of pupilage must pass ere the young pilot may be trusted in charge of a vessel to guide it through the crooked, narrow channel, where only the hidden dangers of sunken rocks or treacherous shoals beset him, while in less than *one-fourth* of that time we profess that one may qualify himself to pilot that most precious craft—a human life—through the long, dark, intricate windings of disease, where at every turn death lies concealed, so close at hand and so difficult to avoid that nothing but the most consummate skill can insure safety?" But, alas! so it is, and as Professor Pepper is my authority in stating that the vast majority of American medical students receive the degree in medicine without ever having felt a sick man's pulse or listened to the sounds of the lungs or heart, I question *which* is the *greatest* public calamity, an occasional epidemic of cholera, or the regular recurring annual epidemic of some 4,000 doctors let loose on an innocent and unsuspecting public?

Compare but for one moment the system of medical education in force in all other civilized countries. Take Germany, for example, which is a fair type of them all, although in several of the other countries the course of study is even longer than there. But one comparison will suffice for our purpose. To matriculate in any German University the medical student must pass a preliminary examination in Latin, Greek, German, history, mathe-

matics, and the elements of natural science. The course of lectures extends over four years, 9½ months in each year, and is as follows :

	Number of hours weekly.
Chemistry	6 for 1 year.
Physics	4 " 1 "
Zoology and Comparative Anatomy	3 " 1 "
Botany	3 " 1 "
Mineralogy and Geology	2 " 1 "
Anatomy, Histology and Preparation of Specimens	10 " 1 "
Physiology, with work in Laboratory	8 " 1 "
General Pathology, Pathological Anatomy, with practical work	6 " 1 "
Pharmacology, Toxicology, Prescription Writing	2 " 1 "
Special Pathology, Medical Clinics, Course on Physical Diagnosis	10 " 2 "
General and Special Surgery, Clinics, Bandaging, Operating	5 " 2 "
Obstetrics and Gynæcology, Clinics	3 " 1 "
Eye and Ear Clinics, use of Ophthalmoscope, Operations	4 " 1 "
Forensic Medicine	2 " 1 "

Examinations are held at the end of the second year (tentamen physicum) upon anatomy, physiology, chemistry, physics, botany, zoology and mineralogy, and at the end of the fourth year, upon the remaining subjects of the course. This latter examination precedes more or less closely (according to the proficiency of the candidate) the final examination, which is conducted by the faculty, each professor examining the candidate in his own department. After passing the examination and presenting a printed thesis, he receives the degree of Doctor of Medicine. This degree, however, does not entitle him to practice, and he has still to pass another examination before a State Board of Examiners. This examination is divided into five sections, and includes, besides a theoretical examination, the preparation and demonstration of specimens of the osseous, vascular and nervous systems ; the demonstration of an autopsy and a practical examination in medicine, obstetrics and gynæcology, physiology and microscopy. As showing the severity with which the State examinations are conducted, it may be stated that on an average 25 per cent. of the graduates fail.*

* From Table IV. of Pepper's Address on Higher Education.

Who are the teachers? Four dollars and fifty cents does not constitute a professorship in German universities. Those temples of science are occupied by men whose names appear in every text-book of medicine and are familiar to every student and physician, first as lecturers, then by reason of original work and popularity promoted to the position of so-called extraordinary professors, and finally, when known as *authorities* promoted to the high positions of Ordinary Professors, they occupy the loftiest stations in public esteem and admiration, and their honored names endure forever.

From the fact that we have more medical schools than can be found in the rest of the whole world, it naturally follows that we have also a greater proportion of physicians to the population than exists in any other country. According to the census of 1880, in a population of 50,000,000 we had 85,761 physicians, or one physician to every 585 persons.

In France the proportion is one physician to every 2,000 persons.

In Austria, one to every 2,500 persons.

In Germany, one to every 3,000 persons.

In Italy, one to every 3,500 persons.

In Sweden, one to every 7,500 persons.

And so on.

Permit me to again quote Professor Pepper: "Now, in order that a physician shall be able to earn his living from the practice of his profession, it is evident that there must be an adequate number of persons who habitually employ him. There are great general truths underlying every part of our social organization. Marriages, births, deaths, even suicides and murders, are found to stand in certain definite proportions to population, and so will it be found, taking one year with another, that each individual needs a certain definite amount of medical service. Of course, in certain places where the climate is bad and the pursuits of the inhabitants are injurious to health, there will be more sickness than where the conditions of life are more favorable. But still, taking the length and breadth of the principal countries, it may be said that one thoroughly qualified medical man can minister efficiently to, and in turn be fairly supported by, a population of

from 1,500 to 2,000 persons." After comparing this ratio with the actual ratio existing here, he continues: "The profession at large are awakening to the fact that its ranks have been fearfully overstocked by the selfishness of the medical schools, and I make bold to assert, well knowing the unparalleled depression of all business interests, that there are but few classes of the community of which a larger proportion are *not* earning a living than of the medical profession."

One of the most prominent physicians in New York City, who has given a great deal of thought and attention to the matter under consideration, states his opinion thus: "In reality to-day a young man without money or influence, whatever his talents, address or attainments, and however exceptionally equipped for his work, has less prospect of success, starting in the world as a physician, than in any other department of intellectual activity. Energy might avail him in business, but not in medicine, and the more energetic he is, the more it will gall him to wait for patients that never come and starve while they are coming. I could tell you the subsequent history of many promising graduates, such tales of broken hearts, blighted ambition, disappointed hopes and wrecked lives, from no fault of their own, only because there are three doctors where only one is needed. And *this* is the pass to which our present system of medical education has brought a once noble profession." The *Boston Medical Journal*—the most conservative medical journal in the United States—has the following editorial in a recent number: "The swarms of young men that are about to invade the numerous medical schools might well pause before setting forth on this so perilous career. Such deliberation is especially proper on the part of those who contemplate exercising the profession as a livelihood, and who possess no resources on which to fall back for a series of years during the waiting for patients. There may be room in the upper story, but there is no lack of eager, hungry, able competitors for the vacant space that is there."

But, gentlemen, what use is there in quoting the opinions of others? There is not an alumnus present to-night who cannot confirm all that has been said, from his own personal experience and observation.

The action of our Diploma-Mills, in adding each year thousands of young men to the ranks of a profession already filled and overflowing, is rapidly producing an army of genteel paupers, too proud to beg, too honest to steal, but too poor to exist.

My remarks, gentlemen, are not dictated by any bitter feeling. My own lines have fallen in pleasant places. But it is the knowledge of the truth which I assert, the result of personal investigation, the acquaintance with many in the profession, who, though brilliantly endowed, are struggling for a mere pittance by reason of the terrible competition; the tales of poverty, debt and misfortune which it has been my lot to be obliged to listen to,—it is for these reasons, gentlemen, that I PROTEST against this infamous system of medical education in this country; this starting of medical colleges where none are needed; multiplying them where there are already far more than are required; creating more free dispensaries to diminish still further the scant field in which the young physician has to find an existence. Against these abuses I protest, and ask your co-operation in endeavoring to stem the tide which is sweeping us down to a still lower plane of professional strife and degradation. What, then, is the remedy? No reform can be expected from the Colleges, for obvious reasons; for, managed as they are, as private enterprises for business purposes solely, they naturally resist anything calculated to impair the very object for which they exist. As in a free country like ours, it is unfortunately impossible to cause the "Professors" to be imprisoned at hard labor and the Colleges to be burned down, we have to seek elsewhere for relief. The individual physician can do nothing, but as in unity lies strength, so with us, if we will only co-operate, much can be accomplished. What *we* require, and what *every* State in the Union requires, is a State Board of Medical Examiners, whose license alone will authorize the practice of medicine. Such a Board should be composed of the representative men of the profession; the examination for a license to be rigid and searching, covering all the branches of medicine, theoretical as well as practical. Such a Board would cause a sudden weeding out of all the mushroom colleges in this and every other State, and would soon oblige the remaining colleges to adopt a compulsory four years'

course of study. It would soon diminish the ratio of physicians to the population, and in time re-establish a healthy normal average. Such a Board would soon place us on a par with foreign countries, the people would be protected from quacks and charlatans, and physicians be enabled to obtain a fair and decent living. Let us then by using every means within our power strive to accomplish this result. Let us petition the Legislature, enlist the press in our behalf, create a healthy public sentiment in favor of the adoption of such a law; pass resolutions to that effect, appoint in this Association a standing committee on Legislation; in short, *work*, do active, *hard work*, not only watch and wait, and success is bound to ultimately crown our efforts, and open up a new era in the science and practice of medicine in these United States.

Finally, gentlemen, one other duty remains for us to perform. Do *not* encourage any young man to study medicine. On the contrary, by every means within your power enlighten him as to the folly of such a step. But if you find that he is stubborn, and intends to act utterly regardless of his true interests, and has medicine "on the brain," so to speak, *then*, and not until *then*, make it your duty to present the claims of those few colleges who are earnestly striving and working for a higher medical education, among whom the Chicago Medical College has always been found.

May the day soon dawn when our 116 medical colleges shall have ceased to exist, and out of their ashes have arisen a few Universities of Medicine, fostered by the National Government, filled with students from all over the globe, taught by Professors who have earned their titles by reason of original investigation in the realms of science, and who are recognized as authorities throughout civilization.



